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Comment

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION FROM RESEARCH INSTITUTES: IS IT SCIENCE COMMUNICATION OR PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Press releases — the new trend in science communication

Charlotte Autzen

ABSTRACT: Scientific institutions have for a long time known the importance of framing and owning stories about science. They also know the effective way of communicating science in a press release. This is part of the institution's public relations. Enhanced competition among research institutions has led to a buildup of communicative competences and professionalization of public relations inside the institutions and the press release has become an integrated part of science communication from these institutions. Changing working conditions in the media, where fewer people have to publish more, have made press releases from trustworthy scientific institutions into free and easily copied content for the editors. In this commentary I investigate and discuss the communicative ecosystem of the university press release. I especially take a close look at the role of the critical and independent science journalist in relation to this corporate controlled communication.

With a more than one hundredyearold communication tool like the press release it might sound just a bit odd to label it as new and trendy. Quite often in recent years the press release has even been declared dead as a way of getting attention in the media. This might be the case in some fields; maybe the written press release used for marketing new commercial products is struggling. But when it comes to marketing new knowledge from scientific institutions, the press release is as lively as ever with huge numbers vying for the attention of the news media

On the news wire service EurekAlert! run by the American Association for the Advancement of the Sciences more than 20,000 press releases were posted in 2013. The service primarily focuses on peer reviewed research and a study,¹ which I am currently

¹ A press release posted on EurekAlert! is only available for subscribers for seven days and with reference to the privacy policy of EurekAlert! the platform don't display or share any public statistics on the content and the contributors. By continuously downloading press releases from the platform I have created a database of press releases reaching back to October 2012. The first analysis of these data is quantitative and shows the distribution of press releases among the different contributors. It also displays the geographical distribution.

conducting shows that half of the press releases posted in 2013 were from universities. Being an American platform one might be tempted to think that the press releases on EurekAlert! all came from American universities and were aimed at the American press. But this is not the case. Universities in many different countries including non-English speaking ones post releases here. The platform is a well-established international science news source for journalists [1] from all over the world and the number of registered reporters has now passed 10,000. The press releases are posted on the platform by the 8,655 registered public information officers coming from the 1,829 contributing institutions. According to EurekAlert! close to 200,000 research press releases have been published on the platform since its start in 1996, giving an average of a little more than 7,000 press releases a year. So unless 2013 with the more than 20,000 published press releases was an exceptional and very unusual year, the flow of science press releases has increased significantly.

The most productive universities in terms of the number of press releases posted on EurekAlert! are also to be found among the highest ranked. We see well-known scientific institutions making efforts in order to get their share of attention in the news media. Some of the most productive ones post nearly one press release a day. This indicates that universities believe press releases are an effective means of communicating science. In this commentary I investigate and discuss the communicative ecosystem of the university press release.

The ‘copy-and-paste’ era

Let’s start at the beginning and take a quick look at the ‘mother of all press releases’ It all started back in Pennsylvania in October 1906 where the now legendary public relation expert Ivy Lee sent out what is believed to be the first ever press release to journalists [2]. At that time, Lee worked with the Pennsylvania Railroad and the background for writing up the press release was a deadly train accident killing 50 passengers. Lee’s idea was to be the first to frame and thereby ‘own’ a story before rumors started to spread and the journalists themselves started asking questions and reporting the story.

What is most thought-provoking about this historic public relations event is that The New York Times newspaper actually printed the press release word-for-word. And that is what often happens today with press releases from scientific institutions. Like copy-pasted texts they get printed word-for-word in newspapers and on internet media platforms of any kind with ‘pressing the copy-paste buttons’ being the only contribution from the journalists working in the media. One reason for this is that the traditional news media is under economic pressure meaning that still fewer people have to produce still more content. The online presence and the possibility of publishing content 24-7 on the Internet have definitely increased the need for content [3]. So when journalists can get well-written quality content free directly from the universities, why not just copy-paste and use it? This seems to be the ‘modus operandi’ of the people in charge in the news media.

Among the noisiest critics of this ecosystem, where universities provide content directly to the media, we find freelance science journalists who experience a hard time

selling their independently and critically researched science stories.² No space or need for the watch dog anymore? The longknown hallmark of journalism - the independent and critical voice - seems to mean less when the story is about new results from science and it is delivered from a trustworthy academic institution. Some critics see this as the main problem and insist that science journalism should (and can) only be practiced by journalists independent of the scientific institutions. They talk of pseudo-journalism [4] and para-journalism [5]. The argument is that independent science journalists are the only way the public can be sure to get the truth about science.

I want to challenge this argument by claiming that as long as it's a matter of understanding, explaining and informing about research results (typically based on single papers) there is no special need for independent critical voices writing up the story. Of course there are incidents of fraud and retraction of papers, but in this context that's another story, which will be written anyway. Since stories based on results from single papers make up most of the press releases from universities why not just see them as good old classic science communication, floating out from the world of science in the format of a press release and as stories posted on the institutions' websites? Have a look at these press releases and see what they are doing. They explain the newly published scientific results in a common and not too specialized language. They put the results into context and show the reader the relevance and perspectives of the new findings. Any good science writer and journalist can do that, and they do — as do the many professionally trained science writers and former science journalists now employed as corporate staff inside scientific institutions. So where does that leave the unemployed and apparently no longer needed critical science journalist?

The role of the science journalist

As Dorothy Nelkin [6] stated and others [7] have since repeated there is still a lot of very important work to do for the independent and critical journalist when it comes to reporting science to the public. But I must state that their most important job is not writing news stories about single research results and its not to understand and translate the complex matters in science in order to give non-science publics a grip of whats going on. Even though this is exactly the kind of work that many science journalists and science writers love to do [8], my point is that we can easily leave these tasks to the researchers and the professional writers inside the scientific institutions. These institutions already have motives to do this, and to do this well.

There are lots of reasons why scientific institutions employ science journalists in their communication departments and seek attention in the news media by means of e.g. press releases. This is already a well-run ecosystem. It draws on a strong journalistic writing tradition proven to work extremely well as a tool to communicate science to the public. Furthermore, it might be difficult to change since it's closely related to the way universities

²This was one of the hottest topics on the First European Conference for Science Journalist (ECSJ) held as a satellite conference to ESOF in Copenhagen, June 22th, 2014.

are economically managed [9] and it's also linked to the publication system, where major journals³ often take a leading role when it comes to sending out research press releases. The challenges for science communication seem to lie elsewhere. Over the years I have met many science writers and journalists who love science and see it as part of their job to make it accessible to people. They may not express themselves that way when asked directly, but looking closer into what they often say reveals an underlying perception that people need to learn about science, to get facts and understand science. This perception is often explained by not very reflective arguments like: *'it's important to understand science because it influences our lives'*. This makes cutbacks in specialized science sections in newspapers and science programs on television frustrating for science journalists [10]

But instead of continuing to dream unrealistic dreams of getting more journalistically produced science into the mainstream media, and discussing how to reinvent science journalism outside the scientific institutions (in order to be the ones who write the stories), the many clever science journalists should wake up and get out of their own scientific comfort zones. They have a much bigger job to do for society, namely to start taking a closer look at scientific institutions. They are the ones who should ask critical questions about the institutions' priorities, financing, and the self-claimed privileged position as knowledge producers. They should start showing an interest, not in how the institutions write the individual science story or press release, but how they frame science in a much broader sense. In a time with exponential growth of news stories about science [11], the line where critical eyes on the single story are most important is long past. But that doesn't mean that someone shouldn't take a critical look at the institutions and ask questions.

Ivy Lee recognized the importance of owning the story by framing it. This is classic public relations knowledge nowadays. This is exactly what universities do when they send out press releases about research; they frame the story of the institution. As individual institutions they may not come to own the story of a new cure for cancer or the key to understanding the interrelated mechanisms in the climate system, but by sending out an endless stream of research press releases the institutions all together demonstrate that universities are the ones that own the right to produce knowledge. Many stories sent out from a specific research area might also be perceived as a sign of importance of the area. But is that really the case, or are the many stories just a way of getting attention not just from the public, but also the stakeholders such as politicians and funders?

By using the press release tool which resonates with classical news criteria like relevance, identification and importance, universities also transform them into a discourse of utility. From there the way to *'please send more money dear funders and society'* and *'by the way please let science do what science finds best'* is not long. By framing science in press release after press release the way they do, they use a wellknown journalistic trick. Universities show their value instead of talking directly about it. In the long run that free ride might not be good for either the scientific institutions or society as a whole. So my

³Both *Nature* and *Science* magazine have their own press offices and sends out embargoed press releases on selected publications. As part of their service they also notice relevant communication officers when researchers from a specific university is author on papers to be published.

suggestion would be for independent science journalists to leave their comfort zone, stop concentrating on how to get more science stories into magazines, newspapers and television, and start asking questions like: are we spending too much money on metabolic research and too little on sociology, if we want to reduce the number of people suffering from lifestyle diseases? Because in contrast to writing good science stories and making wellproduced science videos, this is something that the scientific institutions can't do themselves.

The role of the press officer

Noting that a well written press release from a university often is a genuine piece of science communication informing the public about a specific area of science, I move the spotlight from the role of science journalists working outside scientific institutions to those working inside and for these institutions. By working as a communications professional insider you, like it or not, inevitably become part of public relations. This actually means that the same press release I just characterized as genuine science communication also plays a specific role in the institution's public relations and therefore often is labeled as institutional PR instead of science communication. This is also correct but my point is that the press release is both and maybe more important - the genuine piece of science communication is part of the essence of relations with the public and not automatically a problematic enterprise as it sometimes seems to be presumed with PR.

Public relations can be defined as: "the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, acceptance and cooperation between the organization and its publics" [R. Harlow, cited in [12](#), p. 7]. This is vital for all organizations not least scientific ones which need a license to operate from society. By using the words of Borchelt and Nielsen: universities manage their trust portfolio [[13](#)]. Being a scientific institution producing and selling science and education, the piece of science communication represented by the press release is an obvious way to relate to your different publics. When establishing and maintaining mutual lines of communication you need important information to communicate about. For scientific institutions this is science and a wellproven way to get attention and establish contact with important publics goes via science stories in the news media

Critics of press releases will point out that there is no dialogue; you can't ask questions of a press release except the journalists who can contact the researcher. To counteract this criticism, many professionalized science institutions work like other effective organizations [[14](#)] mixing the different public relations models originally described by Grunig and Hunt [[12](#), pp. 21–46] and later developed into the mixed motives model by Grunig [[15](#)]. Universities don't just disseminate information their own way as described in the Public Information Model; they learn to understand what the news media needs and they adapt their press releases to these needs. This is what Grunig and Hunt call scientific persuasion in the Two-Way Asymmetric model. Finally universities and individual researchers are moving towards the forth model, the Two-Way Symmetric model where the purpose

is mutual understanding. This trend is seen in the many dialoguebased and sometimes coproduced science projects popping up in recent years.

A conflict of ownership

One of the perhaps surprising disadvantages of this buildup of communicative competences and professionalization of public relations [16] inside scientific institutions is the effect of the growing competition among institutions and among individual scientists. Also the ecosystem of publishing plays a very important role. The international competition between institutions for staff, students, funding and research partners is sharpened by means of professionalized public relations. The collective process of research done in groups across universities and countries ends up with questions of who has the right to serve when the results are to be communicated in the public sphere.

Who gets to use the results for public relations? In my experience this discussion is often biased towards English speaking researchers, but also universities who just communicate in their own language and make arrangements with the other researchers to do the same. For a small country like Denmark this means that when communicating science we are limited to communicating with the only five million people who happen to understand Danish instead of communicating in a language most of the world understands namely English. Add to this the dominance of the EurekAlert! platform which together with embargo times set by many of the leading journals [17, 18] is optimized to the American media day, and then you have a very unhealthy cocktail seen with Danish and maybe Scandinavian and central European eyes too. The consequence of this is that Danish universities have to publish press releases at times where Danish journalists don't have the time to take action on a story especially not in the more exclusive media like television and print media. This leads to lesser attention in the press than what would have been expected if the press releases were optimized to the Danish media day. The internet media can react on stories any time of the day, unfortunately leading to another challenge, because that actually forces universities to publish at the not so ideal time set by the journal embargo, at least if they want to get a fair chance to frame and own the story.

As shown there can be many good reasons for wanting to own a story. To mention one last reason: the interest in personalizing science because of the need for recruiting new generations into science. This special human framing of science easily disappears if science journalists are mostly occupied with teaching the public about science and when journals leave out citations with names and institutions when they send out their press releases as for instance Nature does.⁴ From Nature the argument sounds as though it's because the science is the important part, but would that motivate you to study science? Ending this commentary by turning into a critic myself I might claim that the journals are simply undertaking PR and framing science in a way that supports their own businesses.

⁴This point was highlighted by Alice Henchley from the Nature Publishing Group in the session "The food chain of science news" on the Euroscience Open Forum conference ESOF in Copenhagen, June 25th, 2014.

Press releases communicating science from universities have indeed come to play an important role in running universities and in communicating science to the public and they might soon go from being new and trendy to ‘just the way to do it’.

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